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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how potential conflicts produced by ethical issues such as confidence and confidentiality can affect the research methodology of educational research and evaluation projects. Despite the differences in site selection, clientele, and relationship to treatment, both evaluators and researchers must make adjustments in method to accommodate ethical concerns. Based on a research study of the political socialization process of Colombian children and several educational program evaluation projects in New England, participant observation systems are considered for methodological modification for ethical reasons. In both the research and evaluation studies, the investigators felt that the risk of the Hawthorne effect or other biasing effects must be subordinated to the observed subjects' right to know the nature of the observations. In addition, honoring assurances of confidentiality to one group of subjects enhances the confidence that other groups will have in the investigators' promises. Examples of ethical conflicts that arise uniquely in muliclientele program evlauations are also described. (Author/DE)

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Confidence/ Confidentiality: A Comparison of Methodological Approaches Used in a Field Study of Children's Political Attitudes in Bogota, Colombia, and in Educational Evaluation

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The questions facing a researcher and those confronting a program evaluator are occasionally identical and often similar. There are, however, critical differences between the two processes. A researcher, particularly one focusing on hypothesis generating investigation, is able to, and indeed should, include a wide range of settings and subjects. The scope of a program evaluation is somewhat more confined; the evaluator must focus on a particular program in whatever setting that program is found. A program evaluator has a client; a researcher may have a funder or a chairperson or an audience but usually not, at least at the outset, a client. The evaluator may intervene in a treatment program to help it accomplish its objectives; the research must seek to keep a treatment program static in order to more accurately study it effects. These differences subtly shape the form and the degree of the potential conflicts and congruencies produced by ethical issues such as confidence and confidentiality. This paper focuses on these differences and similarities using an hypothesis generating study conducted in Bogota, Colombia, in 1970 as an example of research methodology as contrasted with several educational program evaluation projects conducted in New England in the past two years.

The primary purpose of the research study was to gather data that would be useful in generating hypotheses on the political socialization of Colombian children. The focus of the research was to determine the perceptions that elementary and junior high school students in different school and socio-economic environments in a large Latin American city

had regarding their country and the roles citizens play in its government.[1]

Students at 14 schools participated in the research effort. One hundred and sixteen were personally interviewed and 1,432 others answered a written questionnaire. Data were gathered on political attitudes, feelings of social trust, and children's internal versus external locus of control orientations. The relationships among the variables were examined from three different theoretical perspectives: an environmental approach that emphasized demographic variables, developmental theory which focused on age and grade level, and a systems maintenance orientation that dealt with schools' efforts to promote attitudes consistent with the conti nuation of the present political system.

It was hoped that the data would contain evidence that might indicate whether the political socialization process in Colombia is similar to that reported in the United States or whether conclusions drawn from United States data are inappropriate in other settings.

A methodological concern of the research study involved a comparison of personal interviews and written questionnaires in gathering data on the political socialization of children.

Students in classes corresponding to American 3rd, 5th, 6th, and 7th grades in 14 Colombian schools were used. The schools were purposively selected on the basis of socio-economic background of the students attending

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[1] *For a more detailed description of the original study, see Susan M. Bailey, Political Socialization Among Children in Bogota, Colombia, Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 1971, University Microfilms, Ann Arbor, Michigan.*

and the type of school, either public or private. Because the purpose was to generate hypotheses for future study, an effort was made to include schools that were thought to be representative of large numbers of Colombian schools as well as ones that appeared somewhat unique within the educational framework. The use of many schools rather than a select few was costly in terms of both time and money, but the resulting data were full of the contradictions and surprises that help a researcher reshape initial assumptions and formulate positions for further investigation.

Site selection and number of sites are not always options for educational program evaluators to explore, rather the program and the locations in which it is to be studied are usually predetermined, often long before the evaluator is brought on the scene. The extremes of this situation are exemplified by single classroom, innovative programs for which it is often impossible to find a comparison group and system-wide programs for the educationally disadvantaged that require the evaluator to gather data from virtually every classroom in every building of a city-wide school system.

Evaluators often design data gathering techniques based on the requirements of the clients rather than on theoretical considerations geared to the generation of hypotheses. However, in the construction of tests, questionnaires, and other instruments, both researchers and evaluators are usually able to refer to items used in previous investigations.

However, research in different cultural settings may be limited by the fact that previous investigations have all been conducted in the United States. This is particularly true in the area of childhood political socialization, and the researcher found that many of the items used in

previous studies were oriented to American children in a United States setting. When results were obtained overseas that parallel those of the U.S. studies, it is often assumed that the children and/or the processes are the same but it is entirely possible that what is more to the point is that the questions themselves were inappropriate for that setting.

For example, both U.S. and Colombian children might respond "Yes" to a question such as "Does it make you feel proud to see the flag of your country?" However, the differences in symbolic uses of the flags in the two countries would suggest that the responses might have very different meanings.

The use of personal interviews in the Colombian research study was intended to permit an examination on this inherent bias. The interview, therefore, served as a means of validating some of the questionnaire items by giving a clearer picture of how students understood and interpreted specific questions. The interview schedule contained a selection of the student questionnaire items followed by probes such as <u>why</u> or <u>what</u>. Its use also expanded the researcher's understanding of the responses obtained on the written questionnaire because it was more loosely structured and concentrated on in-depth responses. With young children, it is difficult to know whether one is testing an attitude or creating one. A political socialization questionnaire may confront children with issues they have never before considered and they may hastily select one response. More carefully questionned, the children may reveal that they have no strong feelings on the subject.

Personal interviews are also a frequently used tool in educational

program evaluations with subjects being children, teachers, administrators, parents, or others. Since it is unlikely that a program evaluator would need to draw on experiences gained in a different culture, the kind of difficulty discussed above is unlikely to occur. Nevertheless, personal interviews serve a valuable function in the validation of evaluation questionnaires. All too often, the technique is not employed due to budgetary limitations. In a recent evaluation of a compensatory education program, the evaluator was unable to devote the time and money necessary to conduct personal interviews as a follow-up to a teacher questionnaire concerning the value of a supplementary administrative program. As part of the school system's evaluation process, every program evaluation was audited by another evaluator. In this case, the second evaluator used his resources to do follow-up interviews. Since teachers had responded anonymously, it was impossible to ask about specific responses that had been given to the questionnaire items. The auditor interviewed a small number of teachers and found that most of them did not remember having filled out the questionnaire at all. For some of the items on the questionnaire, the responses given by those who did remember completing the questionnaire were inconsistent with the data reported by the evaluator. Unfortunately, there was no way of assuring that the auditor and the evaluator were basing their conclusions on data from the same set of subjects. The resulting confusion would no doubt have been avoided had the resources been available for proper validation of the questionnaire results by the evaluator. The use of personal interview data raises one of the central issues addressed in this paper -- how honest are

respondents going to be if they feel their replies may be shared with others in ways which would leave little doubt as to the respondents identity? In the case of the research study reported here, the decision was made to assure respondents of the confidentiality of their responses and to build into the design of the study as many guarantees of anonymity as possible.

In administering the questionnaires during the Colombian field work, the researcher and her assistants introduced themselves to the class and explained that they were interested in learning more about how children felt about certain things. They explained that the paper and pencil questionnaire was not a test and that no one at the school would see their papers. The students were asked not to put their names on the questionnaires unless they wanted to do so. The researchers then asked if there were any questions and answered those that did not concern the specific nature of the questionnaire items.

The personal interview procedures were explained and those students who wished to be interviewed were asked to put their names on pieces of paper which were then drawn from a hat. The children selected for the interview were taken to a private room and interviewed individually.

After the interviewees had left the room, the written questionnaires were distributed. The children were reminded again that it was not a test, that no one at the school would see it, and that they need not put their names on the papers. They were cautioned to answer individually and to leave blank any questions that they preferred not to answer.

Students were assured of the confidentiality of their responses in

order to maximize the honesty of their replies and to reinforce the point that survey instruments were not tests. Teachers and administrators at all of the schools were very interested in the research and despite the repeated explanations that student questionnaires were confidential, several assumed that they would be allowed to review student responses. The researcher's insistence that this would not be possible caused an occasional ruffled feather, but had long range benefits in that it reinforced the other guarantees of confidentiality that had been given.

For example, school administrators had been assured that no school would be referred to by name and that no data on students at a specific school would be released to anyone other than persons specifically approved by the school director. This assurance was kept despite requests from various agencies for data beyond that contained in the final report. This assurance was particularly important in obtaining the cooperation of school staff people on two of the data gathering instruments that dealt with school milieu and teacher attitudes.

A school data sheet was used to record descriptive information about the school and also to record the researchers impressions of the general classroom atmosphere and the educational philosophy prevalent within the school. This data was collected informally during the researcher's initial visit to the school and on subsequent visits when students were being interviewed. Although observational data collected when subjects are unaware of the collection process may be a more valid reflection of daily routine, the resentment that may be engendered in this way is seldom worth the effort. School officials were shown the instrument and no

attempt was made to collect data surreptitiously.

Along with the practical consideration leading the researcher to a decision favoring openness, ethical issues also required that a full explanation be given to school officials, teachers, and students. Researchers working overseas are free of many of the legislative restrictions facing investigators working in American schools, but the added information one can obtain seems relatively valueless when contrasted with the ultimate distrust that may result. In program evaluations, it is often possible to avoid creating distrust by getting permission, in advance, to make unannounced visits and to conduct both structured and unstructured classroom observations. Occasionally, however, the sensitivities of program staff may require that all observations be announced and structured and that the variables to be observed be made known in advance. In one such program, the evaluator found it necessary to show the observation form at nearly every visit and to discuss the results afterwards. While this procedure limits the use of the data for judgments concerning a program's success, it may serve as a feedback source for program improvement.

It may well be that the ways in which observational techniques are used in both evaluation and research are the clearest examples of methodology being shaped to meet the ethical requirements of the situation.

The Colombian study was designed to generate hypotheses and the analyses concentrated on a description of the data and the relationships among the variables. As had been hoped, the data revealed several avenues for further study and generated hypotheses that future researchers might

investigate. Especially interesting was the indication that the type of system-supported socialization that many American researchers have attributed to public schools may be carried out in Bogota by private institutions. The social trust data also hinted at a possible "coolout" of lower class children. Many of these children appeared to have felt more trusting and less efficacious than did higher status children. Given the socio-political structure of Colombia, this finding was particularly interesting.

A comparison of interview data with questionnaire responses indicated that the pattern of responses was basically the same. The interviews therefore proved a valuable validation check on the questionnaire items, since it was usually obvious in the interviews if a child had misunderstood or misinterpreted a question. The investigator concluded that individual interviews are a necessary part of the investigative process but that they are most useful at the pretest stage. It is there that one can make the best use of a child's level of understanding and of the transitions that she/he is able to make between items. Items that are confusing to students are revealed early in the program.

Future cross cultural researchers on political socialization might do well to conduct a series of tape recorded group interviews initially and to follow these up with some random interviews that concentrate on the child's level of understanding of questionnaire items. Group interviews would enable the investigator to gather opinions from more children in less time than would individual interviews. Follow-up interviews with individual children would assure the researcher that the questions were

understandable and meaningful to children even without group support. A questionnaire containing some open-ended items and constructed on the basis of this type of preliminary investigation would appear to be a reliable instrument for gathering political socialization data from even young children.

The fact that an educational program evaluator seldom has a single client or even a single group of clients leads to some unique clashes of ethics and methodology not likely to be found in a research study. For example, to the extent that the needs or expectations of various client groups conflict with one another, the evaluator is likely to experience some confidence/confidentiality role conflicts. To assure some consistency in terminology, we are using confidence to refer to those situations in which an investigator must establish to a client that she/he is worthy of trust. We are using confidentiality to refer to th e occasions that require the investigator to assure that information received will be kept private.

For example, suppose that a hypothetical principal's association has contracted for an external evaluation of an innovative school administration project. Suppose further that the evaluation design involved, among other things, interviews with the principals and reviews of administrative documents including budgets. It is hard to imagine a better example of an evaluation study with few client groups. On the surface, it appears that only the principal's association is a client, and it seems likely that assuring the principals that all evaluation data will remain confidential is a sure method of winning their confidence.

But even in the hypothetical world the school system is governed by a school committee or board of education whose members will regard themselves as the evaluator's clients and whose concern with fiscal matters may render such an assurance of confidentiality impossible. Furthermore, within the principals' group, some individuals may feel very strongly that interview summaries should be made public to insure that each principal is accountable for the position he takes. It would then be incumbent upon the evaluator to determine which data ought to be confidential, which public, and why. It seems apparent that the decision, no matter what it may be, will have a cost in the form of reduced confidence on the part of some portion of the clientele. If, for example, the evaluator proposes to conduct and release a financial audit, the principals may feel compelled to conceal from the evaluator some instances in which supplementary federal funds have been used to supplant local funds. Moreover, while the principals may be held accountable for publicly expressed positions, the data obtained in non-confidential interviews may not accurately reflect the principals' honest appraisals of the innovative program (that is, the evaluator has lost the principals' confidence).

In a situation roughly similar to the one described above, the evaluator reported that 75% of a group of administrators had returned a confidential questionnaire. Their supervisor wanted a 100% return and requested the names of the respondents. Since the cover letter the questionnaire clearly stated that the responses would be kept confidential, the supervisor's request was denied. The supervisor then demanded the names of non-respondents saying that the cover letter did not promise "that

non-responses would be kept confidential." Of course, the end result would have been the same; therefore, the information was not provided. Subsequent cover letters were modified to state that "individual responses would be kept confidential, but a list of respondents would be provided" to the supervisor.

This example is not representative of the majority of program evaluations. Administrators are usually only one of many client groups. Others include teachers, counselors, parents, students, funding agencies, and the general public. Of the lot, administrators seem most able to understand and appreciate the problems of evaluation. The evaluator's contacts with most of the others are less frequent and more formal (i.e., through structured interviews, questionnaires, group meetings, etc.), except for teachers in circumstances that require extensive observation.

The average classroom teacher has had three experiences that she/he associates with the word evaluation: a required college course (or courses) that emphasized statistics, the recurring responsibility to give grades to students, and the annual 15-minute classroom observation upon which the principal bases her/his decisions about the teacher's professional performance. For most teachers, all three are unpleasant and there seems to be considerable transfer of their negative reactions from these situations to program evaluations.

To earn the confidence of teachers, a program evaluator must first clear up two common misconceptions. She/he must assure the teacher that she/he is not involved in personnel evaluation, and she/he must clearly indicate that the students' right to confidentiality may require that

the evaluation data be reported on a group basis only. The latter is necessary for at least two reasons: 1) because it will increase the probability of obtaining honest student responses, and 2) because it will prevent the use of group-test data for individual diagnosis (a purpose for which it was not intended). An additional benefit is similar to the one referred to in the research example: teachers seeing students' confidence respected will know that assurances given to teachers will be likewise respected. In the Colombian research project, the overall return rate for teacher questionnaires was 77% with no school returning fewer than 50%. In a study of political attitudes and in the face of some administrative opposition, these returns were a welcome "vote of confidence."

Once these fundamentals have been established, the evaluator can score confidence points by speaking freely of her/his own teaching experience, by separating personal from professional opinion, by explaining the rationale for evaluation activities, and by being available as a resource person and hand-holder. Also, the evaluator's revealing that she/he possesses a sense of humor can go a long way toward winning the confidence of any client group.

Some teachers may have had prior experience with program evaluation, so the groundwork may have already been laid. In this case, all that may be needed to gain the teachers' confidence is to respect their confidentiality and remain objective. On the other hand, the teachers' prior experience may have been unpleasant. One of the writers evaluated a compensatory kindergarten program that used operant conditioning procedures to teach a highly academic curriculum. The previous evaluator had relied on a small

highly academic curriculum. The previous evaluator had relied on a small number of unstructured classroom observations and concluded that the teaching staff lacked creativity, was unprofessional, and could not survive in a regular school program. When the writer was introduced to the teachers, two made distasteful comments, one turned and walked away, and the rest were painfully polite. In order to win the confidence of this staff it was necessary to: 1) announce all visits in advance, 2) be accompanied by the project director on several visits, 3) show the teacher the observation schedules being used (what Hawthorne effect?), 4) provide teachers with copies of all evaluation reports, and 5) avoid identifying the teacher or classroom on observation records.

Special problems occur when parents are a target group for project activities. Project staff involved in home visits may not want to risk the confidence and trust they have earned by having an evaluator accompany them. Militant parents' groups may demand the release of names of teachers who are not implementing the program. Individual parents may request information about their child's test performance. Like teachers, parents may have misconceptions about the evaluator's role. In conducting interviews in a school administration building, one of the writers found that approximately one parent in four came in expecting to hear bad news about their child. This was alarming only because parents had been sent a letter explaining the interview and had also been given further explanation in two telephone calls!

To win the confidence of parents, an evaluator must be sensitive to the parents' views of education. Some parents still hold educators in high

regard. Once they know the evaluator's credentials, especially if she/he has been a teacher and/or holds a doctorate, these parents may exhibit a level of confidence that approaches reverence (too much contact with this type of parent may cause one to take her/himself seriously). At the other end of the parental spectrum are a good many former revolutionaries whose general distrust of authority has been focused on the educational system. Such parents may adopt the attitude that evaluators are co-conspirators in a great educational swindle that seeks to conceal teachers' inability to give their children basic skills or good feelings about themselves or whatever. Although these parents may initially seem to be an obstacle to good evaluation, they can prove to be a most valuable asset. If the evaluator will take the time to get to know the leadership personally, the parents will point to specific areas of program operation that bothers them, they will ask questions about differences in implementation, and they will identify the program activities that please them. If the evaluator will then make an honest effort to collect objective data regarding areas of parent concern, there is a good chance that he will have earned their confidence (though they'll never admit it) <u>even if the data do not support the parents' position</u>. One need only to review the materials published by the United Bronx Parents to see how valuable parental input can be to the conscientious evaluator.

A far less tangible client for educational evaluations is "the community." Sometimes the evaluator may know the area he is working in well enough to have formed a conception of the community and to have formulated ideas about its expectations of him. Many times, however, the

evaluator is an "outsider" whose conception of the community is formed by the school staff she/he is evaluating. Naturally, this may prove to be an undesirable situation (unless the evaluation design is goal free). For example, in evaluating a low-budgeted innovative kindergarten program, one of the authors found it necessary to spend an inordinate amount of time and energy obtaining permission to test or interview students. The principal finally disclosed the reason: the project employed a consulting clinical psychologist who had grown up in the neighborhood served by the school; he was engaged in intelligence and projective personality testing of a highly confidential nature. Since parents and others in the community knew him and the nature of his testing, the principal feared that the community would not tolerate revealing such information to "an outsider from the University," nor would they understand the differences in the kinds of testing involved. In the second year of that project, the same evaluator knew the community better and vice versa, so the testing was more easily arranged.

Although additional examples of the impact of ethical issues on methodological questions could be cited, enough have been given to make the point. To summarize briefly, this paper began by noting some contrasts between educational research and program evaluation. Despite the differences in site selection, clientele, and relationship to treatment, both evaluators and researchers must make adjustments in method to accommodate ethical concerns. The use of personal interviews as a questionnaire validation procedure was discussed. It was noted that the annoymity of questionnaire responses. Observational systems were also considered to be especially susceptible to modification for ethical reasons. In both research and

evaluation studies, the investigators felt that the risk of Hawthorne or other biasing effects must be subordinated to the right of those being observed to know the nature of the observations.

Dealing more specifically with matters of confidence and confidentiality, both the researcher and the evaluator found that honoring assurances of confidentiality given to one group of subjects enhances the confidence that other groups will have in the investigator's promises.

Finally, some consideration was given to examples of ethical conflicts that arise uniquely in multi-clientele program evaluations. Discussion of the examples led to specific recommendations for similar situations.